

Conference Paper

Representation of Happiness in the 19th Century Chinese and Russian Art Texts

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Abstract

The article compares representation of happiness in China and Russia in the 19th century using the examples of paintings by the Chinese Haishan school and Russian Peredvizhniki (The Wanderers) school as the art texts of the era.

Keywords: 19th century culture, art texts, representation of happiness, Peredvizhniki, Haishan School.

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1. Introduction

Art text is a repository of cultural historical experience; it is a "cultural guide" [2, p. 98]. M. M. Bakhtin writes that "in the cultural aspect, the text is the basis of humanitarian philological thinking, a direct manifestation of thoughts and experiences" [See 1].

According to G. I. Fazylzyanova, in its essence "art text is a cultural text". Art text as a "concentrated expression of cultural text" [4, p. 417] is an organized unity of interconnected components, compact and reproducible sequence of signs or images that unfolds in time and expresses concrete content open to interpretation. Art text is a form through which human existence is reflected and shaped. It always exists in a concrete cultural context which shape and complement the art text. In the art texts of culture, we can explore the vision of its authors, their ideas and thoughts, but also a cultural context and the historical conditions of their era.

Therefore, art texts contain information on the most important issues in individual and social life. As the collections of art texts, the works by the Chinese Haishan School and the Russian "Association of Traveling Art Exhibitions" respond to every change in the social and spiritual life of 19th-century Chinese and Russian society, including intellectual, everyday, emotional and moral areas; in this way, they demonstrate the country-specific attitudes in defining and solving ethical, religious, social, and existential problems. The scope of this article precludes consideration of every existential aspect;

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for this reason, we will focus on the existential state of “happiness”, which is particularly interesting to compare for 19th-century China and Russia.

2. Methods

In this paper we mostly rely on the comparative historical method, as well as on the method of analysis and synthesis, which help us to explore art texts of 19th-century China and Russia of the XIX century in the context of their ideas of “happiness”.

3. Discussion

Since ancient time, Chinese people possessed its own concept of happiness. “Esteemed Documents” (another name of the ancient treatise “Shujing”, 书经), which forms a part of the Five Classics of the Confucian canon (五经) writes about “five happiness”: longevity, wealth, health and tranquility, virtue, “dying a natural death”. In folk beliefs “health and tranquility” is sometimes replaced by the “official position” (career). This change emphasizes that the material well-being is important for achieving happiness in life. A person acquiring all five components in his life is believed to possess the “complete happiness.”

The problem of happiness always attracted attention of philosophers and artists. Haishan School was not an exception. For example, works of its artists often explore themes of longevity, wealth, career, health, virtues, expressed through symbols typical for the understanding of happiness in Chinese culture.

Since ancient times, the Chinese people have expressed their views of the world in the simplest artistic images full of symbolic meaning. For example, in the painting *Four Friends* (四友图) by Wu Changshuo plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum symbolize human qualities: plum flowers are proud and independent, orchid is deeply ethical, bamboo is stubborn and patient, chrysanthemum is a symbol of purity and high moral standards [6, pp. 233–234]. These images, combined, create a symbolic portrait of a moral person.

Many works of the Haishan School have the meaning of longevity. One of the examples is the painting “Peaches of Immortality of the Goddess Xi Wangmu” by Zhou Xian (《桃实图》周闲). Peaches are a symbol of longevity in Chinese culture: “the god of longevity always appears with a peach, which he took from the peach garden of the goddess Xi Wangmu” [7, p. 32].

Chinese painting, Haishan School including, often uses images of peonies. For example, “Peony” (牡丹) by Zhao Zhiqian or “Peony with Two Hens” (牡丹双鸡) by Ren Bonian. Peony in these works symbolizes wealth, successful career and well-being. Peony as a “symbol of wealth and well-being” [5, p. 24] occupies a very important place in the Chinese culture; not by chance it is called the “king of flowers”, and the image of a peony is often used when wishing someone a successful career.

The painting “Pines and Cranes” (松鹤图) by Xu Gu also has a symbolical meaning of “strengthening the health and firm power”. Cranes are also compared to immortals, because they are birds of longevity and symbolize health and longevity. There is a belief in China that pines and cranes extend life. Pine, which represents strength and firmness, often became symbol of prosperity during the periods when the country was gripped by weakness and social problems.

While in the works of the Chinese Haishan school symbolic images play the most important role in the depiction of happiness, the art of Peredvizhniki school interprets existential “happiness” in realistic images.

For example, V. Polenov’s painting “Moscow Yard” depicts a small and cozy happiness available to everyone [3, p. 300]. The artist pictured a typical corner of old Moscow. During the summer days this yard near the Arbat street is lit with sunlight. Sunlight warms this small yard; white clouds are floating in the blue sky. The yard slowly comes to life: the parents work, the children play, and the animals stroll around leisurely. Everybody has their own tasks. The painting creates feelings of joy and quiet celebration. Thus, V. Polenov’s painting expresses the most important component of the Russian idea of “happiness”: an ordinary quiet life full of joy of being.

The painting by K. V. Lemokh “Parental Joy” also explores the theme of family happiness. It shows a couple of parents holding their firstborn child. Their household environment and clothes show that they are poor and their life is hard, but this does not hinder their family happiness. Equally, in the “Return from the City” by A. I. Korzukhin happiness has no relation to material conditions. Here all family members live happily and amicably, despite their poor conditions.

V. A. Serov’s famous work “Girl with Peaches” also symbolizes happiness and well-being. This is an image of a girl from a good family who has everything she needs. Unfamiliar with sickness, hunger or other trouble, she can play with her little friends in a sunny garden and share her happiness as she shares the peaches.

The painting “The Ice is Broken” is one of the rare positive paintings by A. E. Arkhipov depicting with happiness and hope. It shows spring sunny day at a river bank. Both children and adults are playing. Everybody rejoices in the first warm days when the ice

begins to break. After the spring, which has barely begun, summer will come. The river freed from the ice is a symbol of purity, hope and vitality.

4. Conclusions

To sum up, though social conditions in 19th-century Russia and China were similar, these nations developed very different ideas of happiness. Analyzing the works of Haishan school, we can see that their artistic exploration of the notion of happiness associates happiness with longevity, wealth, health, career and virtue. In the works of Peredvizhniki school the notion of happiness is different: it is an ordinary cozy family life not connected with wealth or career. Happiness is life without sickness, starvation or other troubles, full of inner joy and hope. It seems that the Orthodox Christian teaching influenced Russian transcendental image of happiness as a spiritual guide to truth, goodness and beauty. On the other hand, the Chinese development of the idea of happiness was deeply influenced by Confucianism. Confucianism is based on the noble spirit, which strives for a moderate secular material life hoping to find balance and harmony of its spiritual and material aspects.

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